

H-Net Reviews

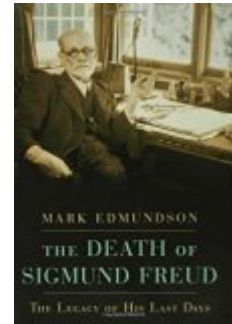
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Mark Edmundson. *The Death of Sigmund Freud: The Legacy of his Last Days*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2007. 276 pp. \$25.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58234-537-6.

Reviewed by Manuela Achilles (University of Virginia)

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Why Read Freud Today?

In this very readable book, Mark Edmundson traces the intersecting stories of Sigmund Freud (psychoanalysis) and Adolf Hitler (fascism) in the days before World War II. The explicit aim is to shed new light on one of the most pressing issues of our times: the allure of fundamentalist politics and the threat it poses to the values of (Western) civilization. According to Edmundson, Freud developed the means for understanding not only Hitler, but also “all the tyrants who have followed Hitler through the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first” (p. 8).

The deep concern with Freud’s relevance today is central to the book’s *raison d’être*. In an earlier article for a journal of higher education, Edmundson recounts a student asking him with tired urgency why Freud was still important. The encounter seems to have been instructive also for Edmundson. He urged the student to carefully study one of Freud’s works, and to then come back and talk again.[1] *The Death of Sigmund Freud* could be read as the continuation of this conversation. Intriguingly, Edmundson focuses on Freud’s last years to highlight his continued significance for the living.

Falling into two narrative essays, the book starts by invoking a possible encounter between Freud and Hitler in 1909 Vienna. Had Hitler and Freud passed each other on the street on one of those cold late autumn days, Edmundson speculates, what would each of them have seen? His answer highlights the marked difference in wealth and status: “In Hitler, Freud would have seen a rank denizen of the crowd, a street rat.... But he proba-

bly would have felt sorry for the unfortunate man as well. For his part, Hitler would have seen a Viennese *burgher* ... and probably would have recognized Freud as a Jew” (p. 8).

The imaginary encounter sets the stage for the dramatic reversal of power and standing in the years to come. By 1938, Hitler had become the undisputed *Führer* of the German Reich. The founder of psychoanalysis, on the other hand, was eighty-one years old and desperately ill with cancer. The reader learns about Freud’s repeated surgeries, rising anti-Semitism, and the existential threat that the loss of Austrian independence (the so-called *Anschluss*) posed to Freud and his family. Yet, neither of these challenges defined Freud. On the contrary; Edmundson describes Freud as a rebellious and self-reliant man who maintained his passion for cigars, as well as his affection for dogs and a dislike of America. When Freud finally resolved to leave Vienna after the Gestapo had arrested his favorite daughter Anna, he signed a Nazi document alleging he had been treated with respect: “I can most highly recommend the Gestapo to everyone” (p. 122). It is this capacity for irony, writes Edmundson, that distinguishes constructive authority from the one-dimensional bad type. The good leader is “not averse to making a joke” (p. 237).

Following Freud from Vienna into exile, the second essay unfolds in London. The enthusiastic welcome he received upon his arrival in 1938 confronted the aging Freud with a dilemma: should he rest on his laurels or

finish his controversial Moses essay, the publication of which was certain to cause scandal? It comes as no surprise that Freud remained the “exuberant troublemaker” (p. 144) he had always been. Edmundson attributes the decision to conclude and publish the Moses essay not least to Freud’s urgent concern with his legacy: “He wanted his thoughts to be part of the thought of the civilized future—even perhaps to dominate that future” (p. 134). This desire to last and dominate raises questions about Freud’s own authority. According to Edmundson, “Freud ... was tempted by the kind of power that he spent a major phase of this career demystifying. Freud, one might say, was a patriarch who worked with incomparable skill to deconstruct patriarchy. He wrote and lived to put an end to the kind of authority that he himself quite often embodied and exploited” (p. 129).

The complexities of authority also inform Edmundson’s reading of the text itself. In Edmundson’s view, *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) presents a significant development in Freud’s thoughts about the origins and psychodynamics of Western religion. *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) rejected the religious impulse as satisfying an infantile yearning for a monolithic and all-knowing authority. In contrast, the Moses book recognizes the belief in an invisible god as a necessary precondition for the emergence of modern individualism and subjectivity. Notably, Freud attributes the gift of inwardness and introspection to Judaism, not to Christianity.

Edmundson does not advocate the uncompromising atheism Freud advocated and practiced. He does argue, however, that “the fundamentalist urge” in Western religion (including Islam) must be resisted. It is evident that he sees Freud’s life and work as a guide towards this aim. Freud and his Moses signify a new, more complex, and, Edmundson hopes, better kind of authority. This kind of authority does not embrace the questionable happiness of monolithic identity, but rather provides the tools to confront oppressive authority. The result is a strong, mature individual capable of confronting great adversity, suffering, and even death with dignity. Sigmund Freud, Edmundson concludes, died without religious or metaphysical consolation. “[H]e left the world as a believer in one thing only—in the future promise human beings might have to know themselves a little more ... and because of such knowledge to live better than they would have” (p. 228). “He was the great cultural patriarch, who stood for nothing so much as for the dismantling of pa-

triarchy” (p. 231).

Edmundson is a great storyteller; I have never read a more touching account of Freud’s last weeks. The ability to draw in and capture the reader, however, also raises questions. At times, Edmundson attributes to Freud almost prophetic powers. Considering the spread of fascism in Europe, Edmundson suggests that “Freud ... must have taken some dark, quiet satisfaction in having anticipated the horrible events at hand so well” (p. 97). The language of heroism and struggle is also striking. Whereas Freud appears as a passionate “mental warrior” (p. 26), Hitler is said to have served with “stunning bravery” in World War I (p. 9). The appeal to male heroism, be it of the physical or intellectual kind, begs the question of the book’s underlying gender assumptions. For instance, Edmundson asserts that Hitler was especially appealing to young people and women: “[W]hen they heard him they seemed to feel, as Goebbels, the most devoted of Hitler’s sycophants, observed, that a new messiah had come at last into the world” (p. 56). Taking Goebbels as a prime example, one may argue that Hitler inspired mad, pseudo-religious reverence in adult men also. The book does not sufficiently address such issues. Neither does it interrogate the gendered implications of Freud’s own authority.

Another possible reservation regards the role of the literary imagination in reconstructing historical detail. The imagined encounter between Hitler and Freud in 1909 Vienna is one case in point. The suggestion that Freud—“the great stoic”—may have cried when his daughter Anna finally returned from Gestapo headquarters is another (p. 84). The book itself helps engage such criticism. Defending Freud’s Moses essays against those who debunked it as unscientific, Edmundson argues that such allegations ignore the essay’s true value as “a possible guide to life” (p. 161). The same could be said about *The Death of Sigmund Freud*. Fascism and fundamentalism, Edmundson writes, are not gone and done with: “There is no such thing as an eternal triumph over them” (p. 241). Using Freud as his guide, Edmundson makes this finding accessible to both students and the general reading public.

Note

[1]. Mark Edmundson, “Dwelling in Possibilities,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 14, 2008, <http://chronicle.com/article/Dwelling-in-Possibilities/7083>.

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